

## LUKE 2.3-7: THE REAL CHRISTMAS STORY

[Chelmsford Christmas Day 2010]

There was no donkey.

Correction: in the Gospel accounts of the nativity, there is no mention of Mary riding on a donkey.

True: Mary could have ridden on a donkey – but she could equally well have made the journey on foot – we just don't know.

Every Sunday this Advent we have had the story of '*Ronta the lucky donkey*', as we have sought to portray the meaning of the coming of Jesus to be our Saviour.

But if the truth be told, it has been an exercise in imagination.

At our children's Christmas carol service we sang the carol '*Little donkey, little donkey, on a dusty road, got to keep on plodding onward with your precious load*' – but that too is an exercise in imagination.

Now this morning we have had great fun with our donkey quiz – but the reality is that there may well have been no donkey. The journey may well have been done on foot.

If it was done on foot, then it certainly was a long journey – the distance between Nazareth and Bethlehem is some 85 miles.

What's more, if the journey had been done on foot, it would have been a tough journey: for Palestine is not like Essex. As Mary and Joseph drew nearer to Bethlehem, the terrain would have become somewhat mountainous. For a woman in the final stages of pregnancy, such a journey would have been quite a challenge.

So what do we know about the Christmas story?

- We know that it was in Bethlehem that Mary "**gave birth to her first son**" (2.7). Both Matthew and Luke are in agreement there..
- We know too that, according to Luke, Mary, like any other Palestinian mother, "**wrapped him in strips of cloth**" - before Mothercare invented 'baby-gros' strips of cloth were the order of the day.

Needless to say, the fact that Mary is depicted as doing the wrapping – as distinct from Joseph or a midwife – is not a sign that the birth was miraculous or painless.

The birth was undoubtedly like any other birth. This means that Jesus was like any other baby, wizened and full of wind, and almost certainly strong lungs to boot!

Sadly the unknown author of '*Away in a manger*' got it wrong when he stated that '*Little Lord Jesus no crying he makes*'. That is sentimental clap-trap.

So what do we know about the birth of Jesus? What is the real story?

Sadly, the real Christmas story has been overlaid with all kinds of inventions.

Here I am not referring to the Gospel writers – but rather to the many preachers, Sunday School teachers, and devotional writers, who have wanted to add extra colour to the story.

Let me give you another example.

Ask anybody where exactly Jesus was born, and they will say that because the local inn was full, Joseph and Mary had to make do with a stable at the rear – it was there that Jesus was born.

To be fair, that is the impression given by most modern versions of the Bible: GNB, the NIV, the NRSV, and the REB, all speak of there being “**no room for them to stay in the inn**” (2.7). But was there an inn in Bethlehem?

- The truth is that, there probably was no inn in Bethlehem. After all, Bethlehem was only a small village and was not on any major road.
- Furthermore, when in the parable of the Good Samaritan Luke wanted to speak of an inn, he used a very different word (*pandocheion*) from that found here.

The fact is that although the Greek word found in Lk 2.7 (*kataluma*) may be translated ‘inn’, it can also mean a ‘**house**’ or ‘**guest room**’. NT scholars believe that Mary and Joseph were probably staying with relatives or friends, and not in an inn.

If so, it may well be that it was not Mary and Joseph who were excluded from the ‘house’ or ‘guest’ room’ but rather only the baby Jesus: i.e. they laid Jesus “**in a manger**”, because there was no space for them all in the ‘house’ or ‘guest room’.

Furthermore, the manger in question was almost certainly not outside in some barn or shed, but – as was the case with the vast majority of Near Eastern peasant homes – the manger was under the same roof.

The animals as well as the family slept within one large enclosed space, with the family living quarters separated by a raised platform area from the area occupied by the animals.

The manger was either free-standing or attached to the wall.

Mary may well have given birth to her child in the family living room, and then placed him in the adjacent manger.

Let me dispel another myth.

In popular thinking Mary was already ‘full-term’ when she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem.

But in fact Luke does not say “upon their arrival” Mary gave birth to her first son

Rather, Luke says it was “**while they were in Bethlehem**” that Mary gave birth. .

The impression is that it was some days – if not some weeks – after arriving in Bethlehem that Mary went into labour.

So where does this leave the Christmas story?

Where it has always been: in the words of John’s Gospel, “**the Word was made flesh and lived among us**” (John 1.14) – the heart of the Christmas story is that Jesus entered our world, and in entering our world, entered into all the mess and muddle of our world.

A sign of his entering our world and becoming one of us is that he was “**laid in a manger**”. Yes, the manger in which Jesus was placed, is a sign of the mess we have made of our world.. As far as I am concerned, there is no messier place for a baby to be placed than an animal feeding trough – compared to the sterility of a baby bed in a modern birth suite, how less hygienic could a manger be?

In this respect full marks to the Bishop of Horsham who not so long ago told his clergy to have buckets of manure in church at Christmas-time to remind people that Jesus was born in a stable full of mess. He said, “*The incense – a symbol of divinity – together with the smell of mature represent the paradox of the incarnation*”.

He went on to say that the aroma of the manure, wafting around the church, would remind people that Jesus gave his life to clearing up the mess we have made of our world.

Yes, the real Christmas story is that Jesus entered our world to save us from the mess. Jesus is the Saviour – in that respect the story of Ronta the lucky donkey, is bang on target – indeed, more on target than Little Donkey or Away in the manger.

“**This very day in David’s town your Saviour was born – Christ the Lord**” declared the angel.

It was for this reason that he was called Jesus – he was the one who would save his people from their sins.

This is the real Christmas story – thank God.